

Construction Starts on Project to Bring Broadband to Much of the Coalfield Region (Sept 25, 2006)

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

Coalfield Coalition Fiber Optic Backbone Groundbreaking

Wise, Virginia

September 25, 2006

I am pleased to return to Wise today to break ground on one of two major fiber-optic backbone installation projects which will deliver high-speed Internet access throughout much of our coal-producing region.

Today the Coalfield Coalition, a non-profit organization comprised of the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions, will begin a project that is supported by federal funding, which I secured, in the amount of \$3 million to deploy high capacity optical fiber along 160 miles in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell and Wise Counties.

As we break ground today, we mark another major step forward in our efforts to deploy high speed data, voice and video services throughout our region as a means to spur economic development.

Approximately ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation, to make us more attractive than the typical rural region to industries looking to expand their operations into new locations, and to create technology-based jobs for Southwest Virginians.

The Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones are two shining examples of the great strides which the communities in our region have taken in deploying broadband services, such as high-speed Internet access, and, today, this work has borne fruit. The availability of fiber optic backbone is attracting new jobs to our region. It was the presence of this backbone that led in part to the new technology jobs in Russell County with CGI-AMS and Northrup Grummon. In Russell and Tazewell Counties alone, over 90 new businesses have been connected to the fiber optic backbone.

Today's celebration marks an even greater stride in our efforts to deploy fiber optic backbone throughout the Ninth Congressional District. With today's groundbreaking, Bristol Virginia Utilities (BVU) will begin to extend the Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO backbones into new communities in the coal producing region of Southwest Virginia and link the two networks together in two locations.

The establishment of advanced telecommunications services throughout much of our coal-producing region and the creation in some locations of redundant broadband capabilities represents an outstanding success in our efforts to attract highly paid, technology-based jobs to Southwest Virginia. Some technology companies need not one but two fiber backbone paths to the Internet in order to have a backup service if the line they primarily rely on goes out. As I meet with the corporate executives of technology companies and firms interested in expanding their operations into new locations, I can now point to communities in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell and Wise Counties as localities which are establishing the telecommunications infrastructure necessary to meet all of their business needs.

In addition to the \$3 million grant, which I obtained from the U.S. Department of Commerce, through its Economic Development Administration, the Virginia Tobacco Commission is providing an equal amount to fully fund the project.

With this funding, BVU in conjunction with the Coalfield Coalition will extend the LENOWISCO fiber optic network in more communities in Lee, Wise and Dickenson Counties. In Lee County, fiber optic cable will be buried along Route 58 from the Town of Jonesville to Rose Hill. In Wise County, the backbone will be installed from St. Paul to Coeburn along Alternate Route 58. From Coeburn, the fiber will be installed to the Lonesome Pine Regional Technology Park, here in Wise. The backbone's route will then follow U.S. Route 23 through the Town of Wise to Pound. From Pound, fiber will be buried along Route 83 into Dickenson County to the Town of Clintwood.

Later today, we will break ground on the Cumberland Plateau fiber optic backbone extension into Buchanan County and new communities in Russell and Tazewell Counties. In Russell County, the Cumberland Plateau fiber optic backbone will be extended along Alternate Route 58 from Hansonville to Castlewood. In Tazewell County, new fiber will be buried along Routes 19 and 460 from Claypool Hill to the Town of Bluefield. The backbone will also extend from the Town of Richlands, where it currently terminates, into Buchanan County through Vansant and the Town of Grundy by way of Route 460. From the intersection of Route 460 and Route 83, new fiber will be buried along Route 83 into Slate Creek to the University of Appalachia's School of Pharmacy.

In total, the fiber optic backbone will be established along 160 miles of the Virginia Department of Transportation's right of way. Construction is expected to be completed for the entire project by the summer of 2007. Following the installation of the fiber, BVU will connect interested businesses who are located along the direct route of the backbone. With a connection to the backbone, businesses will have access to high-speed Internet services, which are currently unavailable in many areas. Digital television and telephone services will also be available. Over the longer term, more businesses and homes will be linked to the fiber optic backbone.

Just as first canals, then railroads and then highways were the major arteries of commerce in earlier eras, in the 21st Century, access to broadband will be a defining feature of economic success for rural communities. Step by positive step, our expanding fiber optic infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity.

I would like to take the opportunity of these remarks to recognize several individuals who have been instrumental in securing the funding necessary for this very worthy project.

Paul Buchanan, Chairman of the Coalfield Coalition, and other Members of the Coalition, for their leadership and foresight in bringing this new infrastructure to the coal-producing counties of our region.

I also want to thank the outstanding staffs of the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions for the work they have done to secure the federal funding for this large broadband development project.

I want to recognize Wes Rosenbalm, General Manager of the Bristol Virginia Utilities Board and Jim Kelley, Director of Telecommunications at BVU, for their efforts. BVU will be managing the construction of the backbone, and I am confident that this next phase of development will go smoothly in their capable hands.

I would also like to thank Paul Elswick with Sunset Digital for providing broadband services in the LENOWISCO area.

Neal Noyes, former Virginia State Director for the programs of the U.S. Economic Development Administration is to be commended for his able assistance in processing the application for the funds for these projects and for his continued efforts on behalf of the many communities of the Ninth District in his new job as Executive Director of the Virginia Tobacco Commission.

I also want to thank William Wampler and the members of the Virginia Tobacco Commission for the large matching grant which is being provided for the project. The promise of a sizeable allocation of local funding provided a significant boost to the federal application for funding.

Finally, I want to thank my District Director, Laura Lee, for her persistent and persuasive efforts in aid of this project. Laura's diligent work has been vital to securing the federal funds which I am announcing today, and I thank her for this success.

The linking and expansion of the Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones marks another major step forward in our efforts to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginia residents. I want to commend all here for the success of this project and offer a special congratulations to the residents and business owners in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell and Wise Counties who will benefit tremendously from new access to broadband services.